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ABSTRACT

Classroom techniques are offered for teaching students how to present a spontaneous (impromptu) speech in a second language, such as for use at a job interview or cocktail party. It is first suggested that such classroom activity be graded minimally to help lower students' level of apprehension. Then strategies for approaching impromptu speech development are discussed, including arriving at a topic (through student suggestion or brainstorming, speech contests, teacher's selection), finding a thesis statement or main idea, and developing the idea. Some topics call for narration, some for description, and some for argumentation. Recommendations for tailoring the topic to the students are offered. Classroom preparation time and techniques are discussed. A section is devoted to preparing students for the specific demands of speech contests. A list of possible topics is appended. (MSE)

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From Contests to Cocktail Parties: Strategies for Impromptu Speaking

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INTRODUCTION

In Taiwan there are English speech contests for students at all levels. There are even competitions to show how well non-Chinese speak Mandarin or Taiwanese. Some of these contests focus on prepared speeches on a specified topic, while others emphasize ability at extemporaneous speaking. Some judge interpretative ability, as in the Lincoln Society's annual competition on the recitation of Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address. At lower levels, students are sometimes asked to describe a picture. Thus in a society traditionally emphasizing harmony there is room for competition, and in a culture where the ability to express the written form of the language artistically in calligraphy is revered, the effective use of the spoken word is also valued.

In a prepared speech, the speaker has a reasonably long period of time, possibly several weeks, to plan, write, and practice, but s/he must give the speech within a set amount of time (generally three, four, or five minutes). In an extemporaneous or, as it is called in Taiwan, impromptu speech, both preparation and delivery time are strictly limited; the usual time given for preparation is ten minutes and for delivery three minutes plus or minus fifteen seconds. That is, from the time the contestant picks a topic at random from a box containing many topics until the time s/he speaks, ten minutes elapse. The student has three minutes to speak; typically if the speech is shorter than two minutes forty-five seconds or longer than three minutes fifteen seconds, the student loses points. At various times during the speech (two minutes thirty seconds, two minutes forty-five seconds, three minutes, every five seconds thereafter) a bell or buzzer sounds; at better facilities colored lights that only the contestant and officials are aware of are used.

However, there are not many times in real life that we are called upon to speak a foreign language in such a situation with strict time limits, bells and buzzers, while an audience judges our performance. Life is not like a speech contest. Why do we bother with speech contests at all? Perhaps they are fine for high ability students who want to show off their skills, but why subject ordinary students to these rigors? Does training for impromptu speaking have any application to our daily lives?

Strictly speaking, no, but we may sometimes find ourselves in similar situations. We may be told at a banquet or conference that, due to the unexpected absence of someone else, in a few minutes' time we will have to introduce the guest speaker or say a few words to fill out the time until the guest speaker arrives. In daily life, our time to speak is strictly limited whenever we make a telephone call and are greeted by an answering machine.

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What do these musings mean for our speech classes? Prepared speeches, of course, have applications for all sorts of future professional activities--teachers preparing lessons, researchers preparing conference presentations, managers preparing business meetings, even parents planning to propose a new idea to a meeting at the local primary school. The applications for impromptu speeches may be less obvious, yet in real life the time limits are even more rigorous. In conversation, when our interlocutor asks a question, as in a job interview or in cocktail party chit-chat, we do not have ten minutes to prepare an answer; we do not even have one minute. If we cannot answer in a way that keeps the conversation going, we will fail the interview and lessen our chances of being invited to future social events.

CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

Impromptu speeches may not have an absolute correspondence to real life but they can provide good practice. How can we implement this practice in the classroom? In this section we make some suggestions.

Classroom activities can be divided into two parts: (1) teaching about impromptu speaking and giving advice to students before the activity, and (2) student practice preparing and giving impromptu speeches. I would recommend doing this activity several times with conversation or speaking classes, perhaps over a two year period, for example, once in the second semester of the first year, once in the first semester and twice in the second semester of the second year. I have found that with each practice session, students improve and gain more confidence. Furthermore, as speaking in public is a potentially face-threatening activity and students fear it, I would recommend starting out easily at first with only a daily grade or 5% of the final grade (basically insignificant) given at first, raising it subsequently to perhaps 10% by the third try as students gain more confidence. My policy is also to give students a second chance should they have real difficulty finishing the speech; this also lowers their level of apprehension. They can always give the speech again (in my class that holds for prepared speeches, too).

Teaching the Impromptu Speech

With most challenges in life, we need to develop an effective approach or strategy. When we are given an impromptu speech topic, the first thing we have to do, preferably within the first thirty seconds, is to narrow down the topic to one aspect of it we can talk about sensibly in the three minutes time we are allotted. If we were to get the topic *Effects of passive smoking* we could not possibly deal with every aspect of this huge topic because of time constraints and our own ignorance. Nobody knows everything. The wise speaker admits what s/he does not know (or has never really thought about) and then shifts the topic to an area s/he can talk about. A medical student may know something about the health effects of passive smoking, a law student the legal ramifications. The ordinary student may recall the memory of her grandmother's fight with lung cancer, although grandma herself never smoked but her husband and sons did. The nonsmoker may recall situations in which the smoking of others caused him discomfort and he may wish to express strong opinions on how he thinks these situations can be changed. In our class we do brainstorming activities; we work through a few topics and look at ways a topic can be developed and how each of us can use our own knowledge and experience to find something

to say. I even ask students to give me a topic at random and then I brainstorm aloud and try to give a short speech.

After narrowing down the topic and finding our thesis statement or main idea, we need to organize the development. Some topics call for narration (e.g., *An unusual experience I had*), some for description (e.g., *The most beautiful place in Taiwan*), some for argumentation (e.g., *Disposable chopsticks should be banned*). For a narration we tell the story with as much detail as necessary while remaining within the time limit. For description and argumentation, generally two or three main points are sufficient with descriptive examples or some supporting evidence for each point. The body is the most important part of the speech so we need to spend the most time on its development. After organizing it, if we have not yet planned our introduction to lead from the given topic to our idea, we should do so. Because conclusions are not usually so important in impromptu speeches, we can usually just summarize our main points and restate the main idea. In speech contest situations, the conclusion may be shortened or lengthened while speaking in order to make the speech fit the time requirements.

Student Preparation and Performance

Before even attempting to teach the impromptu speech, the teacher needs to collect some topics. A good source of topics is speech contests. After ten years of collecting, I have hundreds of topics. I prefer to write each topic on an index card and ask students to return the cards when they have finished speaking. On top of the card I make a note of when and with which class I have used the topic (S 3/95 would mean with sophomores in March 1995) so that I avoid giving the same topics to the same students. Now and then I add new topics and remove some others that are no longer timely. I also keep a list on computer file for quick access and to give to students preparing for speech contests. Such a list also comes in handy when we are searching for test items for oral interviews or compositions.

For classroom practice I choose topics in advance; often I save more challenging and controversial topics involving argumentation (e.g., *Should street vendors be licensed? Will I be an organ donor?*) for classes that already have had some practice and who can do a more effective job in dealing with such topics. I tend to give freshmen less controversial though not always less difficult topics involving description or narration (e.g., *My ideal boyfriend; An interesting dream I had*). For a class of twenty-five students I would take at least thirty topics to class. I hold the cards face down and the student picks one, as in a card game. To allow more flexibility I let students pick a second topic if they do not like the first. After a few seconds, they have to put the topic they reject back into the pile.

Topics that work well with one set of students may not be appropriate for another group. For example, the topic *The worst job I ever had* would probably not work very well with Taiwan's university freshmen because most have never held even a part-time job. Adults in an evening class, however, would have the necessary work experience to handle the topic.

In classroom practice a strict ten minutes of preparation time is impossible to maintain and is really unnecessary. There seem to be two ways to handle preparation time. For students' first experience it is possible to give each one a topic at the beginning of the period and give the whole class twenty minutes or more to think and take notes. I see nothing wrong with their asking each other questions and sharing dictionaries. If at the end of this time no one is willing to volunteer, I call on some of the better students to get the activity going.

The second approach is to start by giving two or three students topics, preferably those who come to class early, because there will be at least ten minutes before speaking can begin. After I give the fifth person a topic and at least ten to fifteen minutes have elapsed, I ask the first person to begin her speech. Between speeches, I give another person a topic. If some students prefer to prepare out in the hall so that they can think without the interference of the other speakers, I may even place a few chairs out there. It is a difficult activity; we should try to make it as comfortable as possible. After all, when we teachers present papers at conferences, we prefer a few minutes of quiet time to collect our thoughts before we have to go on stage. This second manner of giving topics is a bit more chaotic but it does work once it gets going.

We use no buzzers or bells. If a student can speak more than three minutes, that is wonderful. This plays even more havoc with time and in the end means that most students have at least fifteen minutes to prepare. If a student gets stuck in the middle of her speech, she has the option of starting over. In more extreme cases of nervousness, she may be given another topic the following week or even do this activity in my office.

For grading, I use a simpler version of my usual evaluation sheet: 50% for content and organization, 30% for the linguistic abilities (pronunciation, grammar, word choice, fluency), 20% for nonverbal abilities. As these speeches tend to be shorter than prepared speeches and are not videotaped, I only have time to write a few brief comments. For me, a general one hundred point scale is the most easy one to convert to a percentage of a final grade.

PREPARATION FOR SPEECH CONTESTS

The best preparation for the teacher-coach is to attend a few contests, particularly those on the national level. Here one can observe the abilities of the contestants, the procedures used, the types of judges, and other details, and be better able to prepare students and to answer their questions. We all fear the unknown, but we can ease student fears by letting them know what to expect. We can also suggest that our student talk to other students who participated in the same contest previously.

What is the best way to coach a student who will participate in a speech contest? Let us begin by talking about those areas in which it is hard to make quick improvement--pronunciation and intonation, grammar, and fluency. We would assume that a student who has already won preliminary contests before going on to national competition has a reasonably good command of these skills. However, it is not necessary for the student to sound like a native speaker; most contestants do not. We do occasionally hear a native-sounding student, but that one is not necessarily a winner. We all know some native speakers of any language who talk nonsense. Sometimes these native-like students are too overconfident in their English abilities and do not realize that, in addition to good grammar and pronunciation, the judges are also concerned with content and organization.

If we were to coach students for two or three weeks in pronunciation or grammar or fluency, they might show a little improvement in structured situations, but old mistakes would come back with the nervousness of the actual contest. We might successfully correct a word or phrase but the student might not have occasion to use it in his impromptu speech. I believe it far better to depend on the pronunciation and grammar skills the student already has and to work on aspects that can be improved rapidly with training--content, organization, and self-confidence. As fluency can vary with level of nervousness, if we can improve student self-confidence and lower nervous-

ness (self-confident and well-prepared people are better able to keep nervousness under control), then it is more likely the student's usual level of fluency will not be hindered.

As with our classroom activities, contestants need practice with many different types of topics. Lists of topics from previous contests are useful; although actual topics will be different, the student will have an idea of the range. I give the student a printout and ask her to practice at home; she can close her eyes and let her finger pick a topic at random. In our coaching meetings I select a few different kinds of topics, give the student one, give her ten minutes to prepare, then ask her to speak. I take notes and then we discuss what was good, what was not so good, and other alternatives. We may also audiotape or videotape the student's speech and analyze it together.

In addition to the usual topics concerning families, friendship, and school, topics in the news usually show up in speech contests. The best preparation is to know what the current issues are in Taiwan and have some ideas about them. For example, what are the issues involved in Taiwan's bid to join the United Nations and what is the student's opinion about that? Students should read Chinese newspapers to learn about events and get ideas and also read *The China Post* or some other local English publication to acquire the appropriate English vocabulary.

I give the same advice to speech contest participants as I do to students in speech class: narrow down your topic in thirty seconds or no more than a minute, give two or three main points with supporting evidence or examples, make the introduction a bridge between the given topic and your presentation of it, tack on a brief conclusion. We do this over and over again, two or three times a session, for four or five sessions. From the second session on, I bring a clock and ring bells or give signals for the times. This helps students get used to hearing and seeing these distractions and to using these signals to pace themselves; they also get a sense of how much material they need to prepare in order to speak for three minutes.

For a prepared speech, we can practice appropriate gestures. There are so many other things to worry about in the ten-minute preparation of an impromptu speech, however, that I believe gestures can be left alone. The confident student will use gestures naturally and will not look stiff and scared; to me this seemingly relaxed delivery comes off far better than a delivery full of jumping and thumping and distracting movements.

The student going into a speech contest should have a realistic picture of her own abilities with regard to the other contestants. We should always expect some people to be better than we are. Others will not perform as well. We can build the student's confidence up to a realistic level by saying, for example, "If you do as well as you did today, you may place in the top five." I use words like "may" or "might" because there are many variables the student has no control over, such as how many other contestants will have a higher ability than our student has. We should not pressure the student into thinking she must place first or otherwise fail. We want her to do the best she can, to give a good speech. If she can do this, she can be proud of her performance. The teacher should help the student make the most of what she is good at; this holds for far more than speech contests.

There is something else we should tell students; not only is it true but it can help the student save face: two aspects of speech contests depend solely on luck. First, topics are chosen at random. The student may choose a topic similar to one he has just rehearsed or he may get something he has never thought about before. Some topics are easier to develop or to talk about than others. A naturally funny person might do an excellent job with a lighter topic but fail miserably with a more serious one.

Second, order of speaking is usually determined by drawing lots. It is very difficult to be among the first few speakers. The speakers themselves may be more nervous than if they spoke later but, more importantly, the judges may be stricter in their evaluations initially until they observe the range of abilities of the contestants. When there are many speakers, the last few students to speak may become nervous waiting so long; on the other hand, students speaking later know what to expect. So, as in topic selection, in order of speaking, luck plays a role.

FINAL REMARKS

In addition to factual knowledge and improved language skills, there are other lessons we can teach students. We can lead them to think critically about the world around them and help them gain confidence in themselves and their abilities. Practice with impromptu speaking addresses both these goals. If we "accentuate the positive" as the old song goes and focus on the process of improvement, most students will improve. The university years are a time to move from being a memorizing child to critically-thinking adult; we teachers can contribute to students' self-growth by showing them how to apply a critical eye to any idea they encounter. Moreover, at the same time, our students will be practicing, in English, the skills that make effective speakers and engaging conversationalists.

APPENDIX

List of Possible Impromptu Topics

My first day at our school
A person I will never forget
My ideal boyfriend/girlfriend
The strangest person I have ever met
The person I admire most
Qualities I dislike in people
A movie I have seen recently
Something I hate to do
How I feel about rain
A beautiful place in Taiwan
Something I am afraid of
My favorite teacher in primary school
The greatest compliment I have ever received
The most frightening experience I have ever had
The proudest day of my life
An unusual experience I had
The best vacation I have had
My favorite holiday
The funniest thing that ever happened to me
My favorite place to eat
My favorite book
What is the value of tradition in modern society?
If you could begin your life again, would you do anything differently? Why?
What makes a successful marriage?
What is the role of fashion in society?
What do you think are the qualities of a good husband/wife?
If you could be any person in history, who would you be? Why?
What would you do if you won a lot of money?
What would you do if you had three wishes?
What causes misunderstandings between the older and younger generations?
If you could travel anywhere in the world, where would you go? Why?
What qualities do you think make up a good meal?
What kind of animal makes the best pet?
What do you think the world will be like 50 years from now?
What are parents' most important responsibilities?
Does Taiwan need any more universities?
How would you solve Taiwan's traffic problems?
Childhood is the happiest time of life
MTV and KTV are bad for young people
Television does children more harm than good
Men should do some of the housework to help their wives
Old traditions prevent progress
People are not as polite as they used to be

Travel is the best education
It is better to marry for love than for money
It is useless to explore the past
Environment has more effect on individuals than heredity
Military service should be compulsory for women
Intelligence is more important than good looks
Saving money is important for all working people
Spare the rod and spoil the child
We have too much leisure time
Mothers who work outside the home neglect their children
What I value most about being a Chinese
Intermarriage between races is a risky decision
English should be taught in primary school
Should endangered animals be protected by law?
Arranged marriage—does it work well?
Are men more creative than women?
Should the Joint College Entrance Examination be changed?
What should the government do about the deteriorating social order (e.g., rising crime rate) in Taiwan?
What do you think is the most serious problem in the world today? What can people do about it?
What do you think women's role should be in today's Taiwan society?
How can we help preserve our natural environment?
How would you prefer spending a free afternoon?
What is the best way to learn a foreign language?
What is the role of the computer in our daily lives?
What is your most prized possession? Why?
After you die, what would you like people to say about you?
Should street peddlers be licensed?
Do people make efficient use of their time?
Is our society becoming too rich?
Can a person's blood type really tell us his or her character?
Should Taiwan's divorce laws be changed?
How is our daily life different from that of our grandparents?
Are traditional Chinese values being lost in the process of modernization?
Should lotteries be run by the government?
Should everyone get married?
Should we change to a five-day work week?
How much should we depend on our parents?
Do young people have too much freedom today?
Should every couple have children?
Will I be an organ donor?
What is the role of science in our lives?
Something that hasn't been invented but should be
Foreign workers in Taiwan
The problem of child abuse
Littering
People pollution
What we can learn from history
The effect of computer games on children
Recent changes in Taiwan
Ancestor worship in China
My views on fortune telling
Ways to reduce traffic accidents
Gun control in our society
What I think of computer matchmaking
On pirated books and tapes
The impact of foreign cultures on our teenagers
The best way to spend Teachers' Day [or any other holiday]
My views on mercy killing
If a chemical plant were built near my community
If I were the Minister of Education
Saving money is important for all working people
Co-educational schools are better than those that separate boys and girls
Romance is a poor basis for marriage
Living in the city is better than living in the country
No family should have more than two children
It is better to marry for love than for money
Beauty contests exploit women
The rules for compulsory military service should be changed
Too much knowledge is a dangerous thing
People should not have sexual relationships before marriage
Tourism ruins a country
Money is the most important thing in life